The editors of the *Mother Cabrini Messenger* noted a striking trend in the years following Frances Cabrini’s canonization: while her devotees continued to interpret her story in light of broader currents in American culture, such as anti-communism and concern over the nature of church-state separation, they also pleaded for more information about the saint’s spiritual life. Odes to Cabrini’s real estate prowess and her institutional legacy no longer sufficed. “Let us hear less about the buildings she erected and the journeys that she made,” they asked. “Lift the veil, if possible, and reveal the intimacies of her soul that impelled the Church to pronounce her *Sancta.*” Into the 1960s and 1970s, a series of spiritual and cultural developments would continue to pique U.S. Catholics’ curiosity about the inner lives of their holy heroes. Cabrini’s first appearance in fiction illuminates the historic event at the center of these transformations and hints at the ways it would reverberate in the afterlives of the next American saints.

In 1965, Cabrini was one of a dozen saints featured in Joseph Tusiani’s *Envoy from Heaven*. Cabrini was the novel’s only character from the twentieth century, and her inclusion allowed Tusiani, an Italian-born naturalized U.S. citizen on the faculty at the College of Mount St. Vincent, to develop as a minor theme the trauma of the Italian emigrant experience. In the novel Cabrini assures the main protagonist that she understands the pain of Italian Americans who straddled two worlds, given that her time on earth had been “only yesterday.” The novel’s main narrative arc, however, centers on a contemporary event unfolding in Rome. *Envoy from Heaven* opens in April 1965, at a
meeting of saints in paradise. They vote unanimously to send a delegate back to earth, assigned to report on the “Ecumenical Council of Our Church.”² That event—the Second Vatican Council, known colloquially as Vatican II—was scheduled to begin its second of four sessions the following October.

The convocation of the council had itself come as a surprise. In October 1958, Cardinal Angelo Roncalli of Venice had been elected to succeed Pius XII, whose papacy had been long and momentous. Elected on the eve of the Second World War, Pope Pius XII had played a leading role in international relations and issued a number of landmark declarations with far-reaching implications for Catholics the world over. In Roncalli the College of Cardinals had chosen an elderly man who, many assumed, would serve the church as caretaker rather than as an agent of change. Yet in January 1959, less than three months after his election, the new pope, who took the name John XXIII, announced his intention to gather the world’s bishops for an ecumenical council—the first such meeting in nearly a century and only the twentieth in the entire history of the church.³ In his opening address to the council on 11 October 1962, John charged the assembled bishops with aggiornamento, an Italian word with no clear English translation that referred to an updating of the church to reflect the changed conditions of the contemporary world. Though the pontiff himself did not live to witness the aftereffects of Vatican II—his death from stomach cancer in June 1963 meant that he would preside over only the first of the council’s four sessions—he had nonetheless set in motion monumental changes that would alter Catholics’ understanding of themselves, both as men and women within the church and in relation to broader society, at a time of rapid social change.

Vatican II produced sixteen documents (four pastoral or dogmatic constitutions, three declarations, and nine decrees), the meanings of which have been subject to intense debate from their discussion in draft form on the council floor to this day. Yet, as Jesuit historian John O’Malley has warned, a “myopic” view that “focuses on the wording of documents without regard for contexts, without regard for before and after,” risks failing “to see the Council as the new moment it wanted to be in the history of the Catholic Church.”⁴ Inspired to advance such broader understandings, scholars have made a powerful case that the most compelling answers to the question of “What happened at Vatican II?” can be found neither in the council’s documents nor in the local histories of various dioceses but rather where the two converged in the lives of...
everyday Catholics. From the vantage point of U.S. history, the afterlives of prospective saints also offer a gateway to the kind of beyond-the-document analysis O’Malley and others advocate—in large part because of the council’s effort to reinterpret holiness in the age of aggiornamento.

Lumen Gentium (the council’s “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church”) reflected the council’s new moment especially well. One of the council’s most important documents, Lumen Gentium originated from an intervention made on the council floor by Belgium’s Cardinal Léon-Joseph Suenens. Asked by Pope John XXIII to suggest a theme for the council, Suenens proposed that it be “the church of Christ, light to the world,” and called upon the church to engage in dialogues with its own members, with “brothers and sisters not now visibly united with it,” and, finally, with “the modern world.” Suenens’s speech set the overall agenda for the council and led the way for the call to holiness to become one of the great themes running through it. As O’Malley observes, Lumen Gentium said “explicitly, forcefully, and for the first time ever in a council that holiness is what the church is all about.”

Given the council’s emphasis on holiness, it is unsurprising that its directives would shape the way the faithful interpreted and told stories of the saints, the men and women whose holiness had been confirmed by the institutional church through the canonization process and who the church encouraged the faithful to imitate. This, in fact, is the premise of Joseph Tusiani’s novel: the “citizens of heaven” act on a strong premonition that the council’s outcome would determine who would join their company in the future. The council’s goals, St. Peter explains, are “of vital importance to us, who are waiting and hoping and praying that the light that unfolds our spirits may some day soon be shared by all mankind.” Peter and other saints had a stake in how holiness was defined, and if the criteria were up for reinterpretation, they wanted to return to earth to watch it happen. Tusiani’s imagined dialogue captured what subsequent interpretations of the council would confirm: Vatican II represented a “new moment” not only in the history of the church but also in its understanding of holiness.

Had Tusiani been inclined to populate Envoy from Heaven with non-Italian saints, he could have easily incorporated the recently beatified Elizabeth Ann Seton—a local hero on his Bronx campus—as a Vatican II–era ambassador from heaven. On Seton’s beatification day in 1963, in fact, a priest at another U.S. Catholic college had described her in precisely that role. Presiding at a
Mass for Catholic sisters pursuing college degrees at the University of Notre Dame, Rev. Christopher O’Toole congratulated the Sisters of Charity in the assembly. He assured them that, though they were not physically present at the beatification Mass in Rome, the event was of immediate and vital importance to them. Only a select few could make a pilgrimage to the ceremony, but the new blessed was at that very moment making her own “pilgrimage into the hearts” of her spiritual daughters an ocean away—and indeed into the hearts of all Americans. The purpose of canonization, O’Toole reminded them, was “to place before us new and modern examples suited to our times and needs.” Such models were eminently appropriate during this period of renewal, “when the entire church is astir with life and aglow with new vigor.” Listen carefully, he advised, to the “accents of Mother Seton coming to you across the years.” Her message would help them navigate the changes that lay ahead.9

Those attentive to Seton’s story in the era of Vatican II would discern just how appropriate a model she was in light of the transformations the council inspired. John Neumann’s devotees would also look to him for guidance. Echoing themes of Tusiani’s novel and O’Toole’s homily, Redemptorist leaders presented Neumann as a council-era envoy from heaven who could help guide U.S. Catholics through a period of dizzying change. Neumann’s saintly trajectory would continue to parallel Seton’s in a manner that, more often than not, exasperated his advocates. Postulator Nicola Ferrante and others may have accepted with aplomb the fact that Seton had been beatified before Neumann, but they were determined, as Ferrante put it, “to do our utmost in order not to remain behind” her in the final stage of the process. “Let us hope,” he wrote to Francis Litz, Neumann’s vice-postulator in Philadelphia, “that the canonization of our Blessed Neumann may take place before, or at least together with that of Servant of God Mother Seton.”10

As Seton’s and Neumann’s fans wondered who would “win” the race to canonization, their stories and those of other prospective U.S. saints demonstrated how the council intersected with social change to reshape Catholicism in American life long after the last session ended in December 1965. Although Catholics had always reinterpreted their saints’ stories in the light of contemporary events, the teachings of Vatican II gave them license to do so deliberately and explicitly in ways that helped mark this new moment in the church and society. By the time U.S. Catholics celebrated their next canonization, it was clear that the central dynamic in American saint-seeking still obtained: as U.S. Catholics changed, so, too, did the way they thought about their favorite saints.
Holiness in and beyond the Catholic Church

One of Seton’s most ardent champions did not attend her beatification because he had been explicitly exiled from the normal life of the church. In the 1940s, Leonard Feeney had moved from America magazine to a Catholic center near Harvard University and had become an outspoken defender of a strict interpretation of the teaching that salvation was not possible outside the church. Feeney’s refusal to recant provoked censure from the Vatican’s Holy Office and led to his excommunication in 1963.11 According to O’Malley, the Feeney controversy was only one instance of “the great interest in the church and the lively discussion about its nature and role in the decades immediately before the council opened.” The episode thus helps to account for “the centrality that Lumen Gentium assumed in the Council and also for the vexed discussion of Catholicism’s relationship to other Christian churches and other religions.”12

In many ways Seton had been the perfect biographical subject for Feeney. The story of her conversion to Catholicism affirmed in a dramatic way the principle on which he had staked his ministry (and, given the eventual excommunication, his soul): the Catholic Church offered the only road to salvation. Vatican II’s endorsement of religious liberty and a pluralistic society as well as its declarations on non-Christians would make Feeney’s stance indefensible. The priest’s continued interest in Seton offers trace evidence that council dialogues with members of other religions may have softened some of his views, albeit ever so slightly, but it would largely fall to future Seton biographers to write new narratives that reflected those theological transformations.13

Catholics’ changing relationship with Protestants would have an even more immediate and visible impact on interpretations of Seton’s life. In the interest of advancing dialogue with Catholics’ “separated brethren,” the council fathers had invited Protestants to join the proceedings as official observers—an overture with no precedent since the sundering of Christianity during the Reformation. As one Sister of Charity admitted, the new emphasis on ecumenism made it difficult “to examine the spirit and aims of a woman who named as the greatest blessing of her life her rejection of Protestantism.” In the wake of the council, John Henry Hobart, the Episcopalian minister who had tried to dissuade Seton from converting and thereby a figure often demonized by her biographers, slowly evolved into a more sympathetic actor in her journey to Catholicism. In the wake of the council, Seton’s devotees could acknowledge Hobart’s positive influence on Seton in a way earlier generations could not. He
had brought organization into her spiritual life and encouraged her to read the New Testament more assiduously. The brokenness that characterized Seton’s life after her conversion—rejection by her family as well as her spiritual director, not to mention exile from her well-heeled social circles—likely would not have been inevitable had she lived after Vatican II.14

Just as the Protestant presence at Vatican II would have been inconceivable a century before, the U.S. Catholics who had first nominated Seton as a canonized saint could little have imagined that Protestants would also attend her beatification. Seton’s early supporters may have hoped that Protestants would take a lively interest in the cause for canonization of a person who had started out as one of them, but they could not have predicted the investment some of them would develop for her cause in a more ecumenical era. When the archivist at New York’s Trinity Church claimed for the Episcopalian parish partial credit for Seton’s formal saintly success—by virtue of having supplied the crucial document that certified her baptism—he also emphasized the role the church had played in cultivating in Seton a life of holiness. Trinity, he reminded Catholics, had been the place that originally formed Seton in the faith and inspired her desire to care for the poor.15

U.S. Protestants also formed a sizable contingent among the pilgrims who traveled to Rome for the beatification of John Neumann. One Methodist bishop was particularly effusive in his praise of the elaborate ceremony. His own denomination, he marveled, had “much to learn from you Catholics, including the importance of pageantry. . . . We have to learn that people need the thrill of ceremony.”16 His observation ran directly counter to the sentiments expressed in the Methodist Review less than a century earlier, when the editors reacted in alarm to the very suggestion that there could ever be an American Catholic saint.17

Of course, the happiest attendees at Neumann’s beatification were the Redemptorists. They had waited long enough. When Ferrante later described John Neumann’s cause for canonization as the most difficult in the entire history of the Redemptorists, it is likely the first half of 1963 stood out as an especially maddening few months. First, the Sacred Congregation had pushed back Neumann’s beatification from March until late June, very likely in deference to Cardinal Francis Spellman, the most influential of Seton’s “partisans.” Then, on 3 June, the death of Pope John XXIII postponed it once again, to the following October (figure 8).
Yet the rescheduling ensured that Neumann’s beatification would take place while Vatican II was in session. This timing may well have compensated for any lingering frustration Redemptorists felt at the original deferral, as it permitted more of the world’s bishops to attend the ceremony and seemed to guarantee more publicity than if it had been an exclusively U.S. affair. The Redemptorists also had a ready-made publicity machine in place for Neumann in the person of Rev. Francis X. Murphy, CSsR, an American teaching in Rome who served as peritus (theological adviser) to fellow Redemptorist Aloysius Willinger, bishop of Monterey-Fresno. Under the pseudonym “Xavier Rynne,” Murphy published a series of descriptive “Letters from Vatican City” in the New Yorker, thereby becoming an important filter through which many Americans learned of the
The most meaningful intersection between Neumann’s afterlife and Vatican II involved the council’s dialogue not with those outside the fold but with its own members and particularly in discussions about the very nature of holiness. During the debate over *Lumen Gentium*, Belgium’s Cardinal Suenens pointed out that 85 percent of recently canonized saints were members of religious orders and that more lay saints would better reflect the universal call to holiness. This issue, like many others that surfaced during council proceedings, did not arise spontaneously at Vatican II. In the United States, for instance, Daniel Cantwell lamented in 1961 that “Steve the plumber or Mary the housewife with five young children” stood little chance of becoming a canonized saint according to present practice. Citing theologians Yves Congar and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Cantwell predicted that the church would soon search for heroic virtue among ordinary men and women. In 1956, another writer had anticipated a “Saint in a Business Suit” and pictured “a statue of the first American-born saint, a smart, young business girl carrying a shorthand pad.”

*Lumen Gentium* nurtured this revised understanding of holiness. In defining the church as the “people of God,” the document emphasized a horizontal rather than a vertical hierarchical structure, undermining the long-standing presumption that vowed religious were called to a holier life than that of the laity. If the call to holiness was universal, it suggested, so, too, should the church affirm it universally.

When it came to saints, *Lumen Gentium*’s most important chapter was its seventh, titled “Eschatological Nature of the Pilgrim Church and Its Union with the Church in Heaven.” One of the chapter’s principal authors was Jesuit Paolo Molinari, another *peritus* at the council who had served since 1957 as postulator for causes for canonization of members of the Society of Jesus. In 1961, Molinari published theological reflections on the “function of saints in the Church” that captured the attention of Pope John XXIII. The pontiff, stressing the subject’s importance for the work of the council, urged Molinari to expand these reflections in book form and later appointed the Jesuit to the theological commission charged with writing the council’s dogmatic constitution. Molinari recalled the pope insisting that the document devote an entire chapter to saints: How could the church understand itself, the pontiff had asked, “without referring to that part of the church which is in heaven?” Molinari and others...
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drafted the chapter mindful of the church’s need to explain the vital connection between believers on earth and those who were “perpetually united” to God. According to Molinari, it was “the first time in the history of the Church that this doctrine, so intimately related to her life and therefore to her practices from the very first centuries of Christianity, has been set forth positively and systematically by her supreme teaching authority.”

Molinari, a fluent English speaker, would figure very prominently in the canonizations of U.S. saints after the council, along with his protégé and fellow Jesuit Peter Gumpel. During the preparation of Lumen Gentium, Molinari became especially familiar with the story of one U.S. candidate for canonization. In seeking to explain saints’ function in the church, the constitution’s seventh chapter cited models for holiness. From its earliest days, the document specified, the church had believed that “the apostles and Christ’s martyrs, who had given the supreme witness of faith and charity by the shedding of their blood, are closely joined with us in Christ, and she has always venerated them with special devotion.” The document went on to stipulate that the church also recognized the holiness of those who had lived their faith in less dramatic ways. To the witness of the martyrs was added those “whom the outstanding practice of the Christian virtues and divine charisms recommended to the pious devotion and imitation of the faithful.”

It was in this context that John Neumann’s pedestrian virtues, once a serious liability for his cause, became an asset. To support the above statement, Lumen Gentium referenced Benedict XV’s 1921 decree on Neumann’s heroic virtue, in which he had praised his ordinariness. Thus Neumann’s afterlife intersected with what John Courtney Murray identified as the key “issue-under-the-issues” at the council: “the development of doctrine,” or, as O’Malley elaborated, “the problem of change in an institution that draws its lifeblood from a belief in the transcendent validity of the message it received from the past, which it is duty-bound to proclaim unadulterated.” Neumann’s ordinary holiness became part of the council’s argument that its proclamations were entirely consistent with past teaching.

Although Redemptorists made little of the fact that Neumann had surfaced in Vatican II’s most significant document, their new crafting of his story clearly reflected a more pronounced emphasis on his spiritual life and holiness. Francis Murphy, writing under his own name rather than as Xavier Rynne, published a biography of John Neumann in which, while not ignoring Neumann’s external
accomplishments, he exhorted Neumann’s devotees to imitate the bishop in his cultivation of interior spirit. “The most important thing about Bishop Neumann’s life,” Murphy insisted, “was not that he was a priest or a prelate nor that he instituted the Catholic elementary school system, or that he introduced the Forty Hours Devotion . . . or gave new impetus to a number of congregations of nuns.” Despite Murphy’s parroting of the message of decades of promotional material about the Bohemian missionary, his claim that Neumann’s most important achievement had been his “inner self” signaled that he was writing for a new era.26

Litz and Ferrante, too, continued to focus on the ways that Neumann’s sanctity had radiated outward into the local culture—so long as “local” meant the United States. When a bishop in Germany, for example, expressed his wish that Neumann’s canonization take place in 1973 to coincide with the millennium of the introduction of Catholicism into Bohemia, Ferrante chided him for “his inclination to mix politics just a little with the canonization of Blessed John.” Yet Ferrante had no reservations about pairing Neumann’s canonization with the bicentennial of the American Declaration of Independence, and he often indulged Litz as well as Cardinal John Krol in their hopes that Neumann’s cause would succeed by the U.S. bicentennial in 1976. From their perspectives, a double church-state celebration would represent the perfect cap to a cause that had long fused holiness and patriotism in the nation’s birthplace.27

Despite the heavy emphasis on local concerns, Ferrante and Litz also remained attuned to the center, where it was becoming clear that the spirit of aggiornamento would affect the canonization process. Some attempts at modernization were incidental, if welcome, such as the Sacred Congregation’s 1965 decision to allow postulators to submit typewritten material for the first time.28 There were plenty of signs that more substantive changes to the canonization process were on the way. The council’s commitment to collegiality—the notion that the world’s collected bishops, or college, exercised supreme authority in unity with the pope—prompted Suenens to question whether the Roman center should have as much authority over naming saints as it had for the past three centuries. He suggested that the church revert to its former practice of allowing local bishops to beatify saints, while leaving the final stage of the process in the hands of the bishop of Rome.29

The presence of so many non-European cardinals at the council also helped to make clear that the church’s canonization procedures were set up in a way
that seemed to guarantee little geographical breadth among canonized saints. Suenens, pointing out that 90 percent of canonized saints came from just three European nations, suggested that the church redesign the process so that the roster of saints would reflect the church’s truly global reach.30 Channeling Edward McSweeny, the U.S. priest who in 1890 had urged the Holy See to validate the “hidden saints” from countries “too poor to stand all the necessary expense,” Suenens criticized the process as “too burdensome and expensive.” Although revising the process was not on the conciliar agenda, Pope Paul VI took tentative steps in that direction in 1969, when he made some minor adjustments to the procedures and renamed the Sacred Congregation of Rites the Congregation for the Causes of Saints.31 More sweeping revisions would not take place until the 1980s.

But another intervention made by Suenens during the council, while unrelated to canonization, would nonetheless have a more immediate and dramatic impact on the way one segment of the U.S. Catholic population approached saint-seeking in the years to come. In October 1963, during the council’s second session, Suenens asked the assembled bishops how they could reasonably deliberate the future of the church when half of it was missing: no women had been invited. In response, Pope Paul VI appointed fifteen female “auditors” to attend the council beginning with its third session in September 1964.32 Among these was Sister Mary Luke Tobin, superior of the Kentucky-based Sisters of Loreto and chair of the Conference of Major Superiors of Women, the umbrella organization founded in 1956 to facilitate cooperation among women’s religious congregations in the United States. In the wake of the council, Tobin became one of many U.S. Catholic sisters who would spearhead a wholesale transformation of religious life. Suenens himself had argued for many of these changes in his book The Nun in the World, which first appeared in English in 1962. Insisting that all religious had an obligation to spread the gospel by direct personal action, he encouraged sisters to reform structures and patterns of religious life to engage more completely with the world beyond convent walls.33 These proposals were incorporated into conciliar and postconciliar decrees on religious life, and the changes they inspired would prompt many sisters to question their identities as citizens of the United States and as women in the church. And as they did so, they increasingly looked to their favorite saints as signposts in an unfamiliar world and as vehicles to express a new understanding of their place in it.
Sisters and Their Saints in the Council Era

In 1977, Rev. Joseph Kerins, superior of the Redemptorists of the Baltimore Province, spoke to women who belonged to two Philadelphia congregations associated with John Neumann: the Sisters of the Third Order of St. Francis and the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (IHMs). Kerins reminded the sisters of their historic links to Neumann. To the Franciscans, he emphasized the bishop’s role as their founder—a role that Redemptorists had recently enlarged in their efforts to claim for him the miracle exemption. To the IHMs, Kerins spoke of the way Neumann had “saved” the congregation by welcoming members from the original Detroit-based community to Philadelphia during a particularly complicated period in its history. Kerins’s reflections on the past, however, merely served as a preface to more extended musings on the future. Whatever assistance Neumann had offered sisters during his lifetime, the superior argued, it was dwarfed in significance by the ways he could help contemporary sisters from his heavenly perch. Neumann’s own experience in adapting to an unfamiliar environment rendered him a particularly effective guide through a tumultuous era of change. Indeed, Kerins argued, sisters’ “traumatic transition” from the old world of the pre-council era to the new one it created rivaled in scale the adjustment Neumann had made in his migration from Bohemia to the United States over a century before.34

It was an evocative comparison. Neumann’s passage through the final stages of the canonization process did overlap with a period of perplexing change for U.S. Catholic sisters. As with other reforms associated with the council, the restructuring of religious life had been under way in the decades before it opened. In particular, U.S. sisters’ growing awareness of an identity beyond their particular communities—nourished in the Sister Formation Movement, in the Conference of Major Superiors of Women, and in colleges like Notre Dame and other Catholic universities where sisters studied together—shaped the way they responded to the transformations of the council era.

Nevertheless, Perfectae Caritatis, the council’s “Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life,”35 prompted what seemed a rapid transformation, by turns exciting and unsettling to many Catholics. Promulgated in 1965, the decree stipulated that congregations should “renew” themselves by engaging in extended reflection on how the original vision of their founder would translate into the modern world. It directed each community of men and women to convene a special general chapter meeting (or legislative assembly)
within three years, to engage in designated periods of experimentation, and to rewrite their constitutions to permit them to respond to the call of the gospel in the contemporary world. In a dramatic departure from past practice, all members of the community were to be consulted in preparation for this. The search for renewal prompted most communities to implement a variety of structural changes. The strict rules that governed convent life became much less rigid, and community members were permitted more latitude in choice of ministry, living arrangements, and dress.

Vatican II’s broader message about the whole church also transformed the way religious life was lived and perceived by Catholics.36 Lumen Gentium’s invitation to universal holiness undermined the two-tiered spirituality that had long placed ordained and vowed Catholics a plane above the non-ordained and non-vowed laity. Seeking to identify with members of the Catholic laity (which, as non-ordained members of church, they had technically always been), many individual sisters and communities made decisions that reoriented religious life. They chose, for example, to live in apartments rather than convents, to revert to their given names (to emphasize their baptismal rather than vocational call), and to modify or even abandon the habit (which had established a visible distinction between sisters and the rest of society). Given the council’s emphasis on the call to holiness of all the baptized, the document instructed, “religious life could no longer be understood as an elite vocation to a ‘life of perfection’ that made its members superior to other Christians.”37

Gaudium et Spes, the council’s “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World,” was equally influential in renewing and changing religious life. Although the document runs to over thirty thousand words, its essence is communicated in its first line: “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ.”38 The document’s strong social content prompted many American sisters to choose new forms of ministry and inspired them toward a commitment to civil rights and other social justice movements.39 In 1965, a number of U.S. sisters converged on Selma, Alabama, to join civil rights activists under the leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on a march to the state capital of Montgomery to protest restrictions on African American voting rights. Selma not only represented the first mass movement of whites into the civil rights movement but also served as a highly visible marker of the church’s engagement with the most pressing social problem of the day. Selma’s white marchers were
disproportionately Catholic, and habited nuns attracted a great deal of media attention.

Sister Mary Peter Traxler (or Margaret Ellen Traxler, as she was known after she reverted to her birth name in the late 1960s) found the Selma experience to be so powerful that she was compelled to redefine her life as a woman religious. In an article titled “After Selma, Sister, You Can’t Stay Home Again!,” Traxler urged Catholic sisters to step outside the classroom and convent and work for justice in the world. Many Catholic sisters did indeed leave the classroom. As scholar Michael Novak described in his 1966 report on the “new nuns,” sisters could be found working in urban renewal programs, advocacy, addiction counseling, chaplaincy, and government posts. Within Lyndon B. Johnson’s Great Society, for example, American sisters worked with Head Start, Job Corps, and VISTA.

The combination of new ministries and the disappearance of the habit and other traditional hallmarks of religious life prompted debate, conflict, and soul-searching within and beyond religious communities. Sisters’ gravitation from traditionally female ministries of teaching and nursing in favor of other ministries had dramatic consequences for church-sponsored institutions. It particularly affected the Catholic parochial school system, which had long depended on the subsidized labor that women religious provided. Compounding the problem was a precipitous decline in the overall numbers of Catholic sisters. In the aftermath of the council, many men and women left religious life either because they felt the reforms had gone too far or had not gone far enough. In addition to these massive departures, the number of new vocations plummeted. The cumulative drop in numbers forced many Catholic schools to close. Others remained open, with only a handful of vowed religious on staff, as lay Catholics stepped in to fill roles traditionally occupied by priests, brothers, or sisters.

This reality formed the backdrop of Joseph Kerins’s 1977 message to the Philadelphia Franciscans and IHMs, communities whose members long had helped to sustain the archdiocese’s vast parochial school system. Some, Kerins conceded, believed that Neumann, surveying recent changes in religious life, “would throw up his hands in dismay—and run away in desperation.” But the superior dismissed out of hand those who sounded a note of despair, insisting that Neumann would take, on the whole, an optimistic view of the transformations in religious life. True, Neumann would admit to some challenges, but he would focus on the “flowers, blooming bright in religious life,” such as loosening authority structures, flexibility in living arrangements, and greater range in
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ministries. Neumann would recognize that this “new freedom” would “enable Catholic sisters to make better use of “the talent, judgment, vision, and grace of the Holy Spirit.” In Kerins’s view, even Neumann, long lionized as the founder and champion of the school system, would be heartened, rather than disturbed, at sisters’ efforts today to “animate” institutions rather than being content with merely “staffing” them. (Kerins here was using a descriptive term intended to convey the effort of vowed religious remaining on staffs of congregational-sponsored institutions to empower their lay partners and infuse them with the congregational charism or spirit). The shuttering of some Catholic schools and decreased representation of sisters on the faculty of others was a small price to pay, Kerins insisted, for the sisters’ greater commitment to the poor and oppressed. Now channeled to more urgent pursuits, sisters’ energy exhibited the “mobility and flexibility” that would be their key words in responding to the signs of the times.

The same themes surfaced among the Sisters of Charity as they, too, reflected on Elizabeth Ann Seton’s meaning in a new world. In a homily delivered to the sisters in New Jersey, Sister Francis Maria Cassidy argued that Seton would have responded to the council’s decree on adaptation and renewal (whose official name, after all, translated to “Perfect Charity”) with a hearty “Amen.” Remembering Seton’s “invincible faith in and devotion to the living church” and her “determination to be an instrument of love and service . . . especially here in America,” Cassidy exhorted the members of the New Jersey–based Sisters of Charity to pray for guidance about how to translate Seton’s vision to the contemporary United States. Continuity derived not from the sisters’ specific ministries but rather from their response to the most urgent needs of the church and the nation. The important point, Cassidy contended, was that “John Carroll [bishop of Baltimore when Seton founded the Sisters of Charity] needed Catholic schools for America as desperately as Terrence Cooke [sic] [Terence Cooke, Spellman’s successor as archbishop of New York] needs a working anti-poverty program for New York.”

John Tracy Ellis, the historian who had recommended Annabelle Melville as Seton’s biographer, echoed Cassidy in his post–Vatican II reflections on Seton. Ellis had retained an avid interest in Seton’s cause for canonization. On the eve of the council, in fact, Ellis had told an international group of Catholic laywomen that he could “think of few more appropriate undertakings in the realm of the spirit” than “an energetic campaign of prayers” on behalf of Seton’s beatification. Fifteen years later, Ellis speculated that Seton would
have sympathized with “certain aims of the Women’s Liberation Movement” or the leadership of the National Organization of Women. If “every age in recorded history” required heroes and heroines to whom others could turn to shape their thoughts and actions, Ellis argued, Seton’s guidance and example were especially welcome in the 1970s, “an age of ceaseless change and bewildering complexity.”

If the transformations of the council era turned Neumann and Seton into figures who could offer wisdom and consolation on the cusp of their canonizations, they also affected causes that were far less advanced. For many Catholic women’s religious communities in the United States, the call to reexamine their founding charism in the light of the contemporary world reinvigorated a number of causes for canonization that had lost momentum in the era of the nation saint. One such example was the Italian-born missionary Samuel Mazzuchelli. The Sinsinawa Dominicans read in the council directives a mandate to press forward on the cause for canonization of the man they revered as their founder. Archbishop John Ireland and the sisters had nominated “the Apostle of the Midwest” as a prospective saint in the early days of the quest for a native patron, though they had taken no formal steps. While Amleto Cicognani’s promotion of Mazzuchelli, as well as the centennial of his arrival in the United States, inspired modest publicity in the 1930s, the story of his evangelization on a massive swath of the midwestern frontier never quite meshed with the decade’s “new ideal of sainthood.” Mazzuchelli’s lack of broad appeal and the disruptions of World War II, combined with the sisters’ obligation to rely on Dominican priests to act in their stead, forcing them to work on the case only at some remove, were all probably factors that delayed a formal opening of a cause on his behalf. By the late 1940s and 1950s, the Sinsinawa Dominicans and their clerical representatives were gathering documentation and cataloging it meticulously, preparing it to meet rigorous Roman standards, and in 1964 the bishop of Madison, Wisconsin, officially opened Mazzuchelli’s ordinary process by appointing a commission to review all documents: 1,130 in total, including 417 written by Mazzuchelli himself. The evidence suggests that the sisters’ renewed appreciation of their founder in the light of Vatican II gave the cause added impetus. “Something beautiful is happening in the Congregation now,” one sister observed in 1972, “in that there are Sisters asking for and feeling the need for more information about Father Samuel.”

The teachings of the Second Vatican Council not only motivated the Sinsinawa Dominicans to pursue Mazzuchelli’s cause more energetically but also
inspired them to assume more visible roles as they did so. The sister most closely associated with Mazzuchelli’s cause was Mary Nona McGreal, who served as president of Edgewood College in Madison from 1950 until 1968 and as leader of the Sinsinawa Dominicans from 1968 until 1977. Even though McGreal neither marched at Selma nor eschewed the congregation’s traditional ministry of education, she nonetheless was a “new nun” who harnessed the mobility and flexibility of the council years to serve in a number of innovative capacities—and to advance Mazzuchelli’s cause. As a founding member of the Mazzuchelli Guild, McGreal adopted the language of Vatican II to make Mazzuchelli’s story relevant to a new generation of Catholics, touting the founder as a visionary with regard to lay involvement in the church. Well over a century before the council was convened, she argued, Mazzuchelli had shown a deep “appreciation of lay catechists” and relied on them “all his priestly life.” McGreal and others also suggested that Mazzuchelli’s outreach to various groups on the frontier prefigured modern movements designed to promote ecumenism and improve race relations.47

The cause for canonization of Mother Théodore Guérin unfolded along much the same pattern. Like Mazzuchelli, Guérin had emerged as a candidate for canonization in the late nineteenth century, when saint-seekers had foregrounded European missionaries’ civilizing influence on the American nation. In the 1930s, Cicognani’s interest in Guérin’s cause had helped complete the ordinary process that had begun in 1913, but decades would pass before there was any more official movement.48 As was the case with other missionaries whose stories did not evoke urban immigration, skyscrapers, or U.S. citizenship, Guérin could not generate enough national attention in those decades to compete with figures like Frances Cabrini. A frequent turnover of male postulactors did not help matters. After Vatican II, however, as the Sisters of Providence sought to adapt Guérin’s founding charism to the modern age, Guérin’s cause attracted renewed interest. It, too, would be shaped by a nascent female activism, mostly in the person of Sister Josephine Ryan, who began to work on the cause full time in 1978.49

While Vatican II propelled forward a number of causes sponsored by U.S. Catholic sisters, it sent at least one moving in the opposite direction. When it came to promoting the cause for canonization of their American founder, Philippine Duchesne, the Society of the Sacred Heart interpreted the council’s teachings differently than either the Sisters of Providence or the Sinsinawa Dominicans had done. Duchesne, like Guérin and Mazzuchelli, had been a
European missionary in the American Midwest in the nineteenth century who had emerged as one of the first prospective U.S. saints. Unlike Guérin and Mazzuchelli, however, Duchesne had advanced to beatification by 1940, in part because the renowned experts in canonization, the Jesuits, directed her cause. While Duchesne’s beatification may not have attracted much national attention, a lack of broader interest had not lessened the Society of the Sacred Heart’s eagerness to see her canonized. Working through their male proxies, the RSCJs had submitted two miracles to the Sacred Congregation in the mid-1950s. Neither of them held up to the scrutiny at the Sacred Congregation, but in 1961, the congregation submitted a third, very promising case, involving a cure that had taken place approximately a decade before. In September 1951, Mother Marguerite Bernard, a French-born RSCJ serving in Shanghai, had arrived in San Francisco seriously ill with a cancerous lump in her neck. The RSCJs in San Francisco, and subsequently the entire congregation, began a novena to Philippine on Bernard’s behalf. By the following spring, the missionary returned to Asia much improved. Bernard’s new assignment was in Tokyo, and after doctors deemed her completely cured, it was there that an official investigation into the miracle was undertaken.

The strength of the Bernard miracle contributed to the RSCJs’ sense of optimism about Duchesne’s prospects for canonization in the early days of the council. Believing that the event was “imminent,” RSCJ leaders had even petitioned the Holy See to delay their 1964 General Congregation (chapter meeting) so that it might coincide with Duchesne’s canonization. They also began to publish a *Duchesne Guild Bulletin* to publicize the cause, one section of which included testimonials of prominent U.S. churchmen. One of the first people they approached, naturally, was Cardinal Spellman. Though he retained his singleness of focus on Seton’s candidacy, Spellman did agree to endorse Duchesne’s cause—though he outsourced the actual crafting of the statement to his good friend Kathryn Sullivan, an accomplished RSCJ biblical scholar on the faculty of Manhattanville College in Purchase, New York. Sullivan, who also served as an editor of the *Duchesne Guild Bulletin*, supplied Spellman with the requisite statement, which appeared in the publication’s winter 1964 issue.

Sullivan and Spellman’s more sustained interaction concerned another subject. At Manhattanville’s commencement ceremonies in 1964, Spellman proposed that Sullivan pursue advanced study in the Holy Land. Such an experience, he wrote in a follow-up letter, would enable Sullivan to be “of even greater
service to the Church than you have been up to the present.” When Sullivan de-
murred, citing the congregation’s inability to fund such an endeavor, Spellman
offered to cover the costs. As was the custom, he submitted an official request to
Mother Beatrice Brennan, Sullivan’s immediate superior at her Manhattanville
convent, who then passed it on to Sabine de Valon, the RSCJs’ mother general
in France. Valon’s answer arrived in August: a firm “no.” Informing Spellman
of the mother general’s decision, Brennan expressed “deep and heartfelt grati-
tude for the kind and generous offer” but explained that Sullivan was needed
at the college. Giving voice to the rapid pace at which religious life was chang-
ing, Brennan continued, “I am sure your Eminence will understand how Our
Mother General is being asked for so many dispensations at this time that it is
not possible for her to accept all of them.” Spellman expressed his “amaze[ment]
at the disappointing answer to my proposal” and contemplated sending "vari-
ous comments and answers” but in the end decided—uncharacteristically for
the outspoken cardinal—to “keep silent.”53

On 15 October 1964, the RSCJs convened for their General Congregation;
the Holy See had not, after all, granted them permission to delay it until Du-
chesne’s canonization. It would be a historic meeting. Valon, who had by that
point been serving along with Mary Luke Tobin as an auditor at Vatican II
for two weeks, had this to say to the delegates: “We are at an important hour
where the religious life, by the voice of the Church, is doubtless going to take a
different orientation.” Citing the provisions in the rule that applied to cloister,
or the separation of the sisters from the world, she explained that it was time
“to go more towards the world, because the Church requests it.” Referencing
the text of Perfectae Caritatis, then in the discussion stage at the council, Valon
appealed to the society to maintain “the spirit of cloister,” even as she effectively
abolished it in practice. Also at the 1964 chapter, the RSCJs agreed to adopt
a simplified habit and identified three major priorities: experiments in educa-
tion, a strong missionary thrust, and an energetic response to the cry for social
justice. On the latter issue, the congregation called for greater presence in inner
city areas and a gradual assimilation of social classes in the schools.54

The changes implemented at the 1964 General Congregation would trans-
form the religious lives and ministries of the RSCJs. Mother Kathryn Sullivan
would make an especially brisk transition from the old world to the new world.
The General Congregation closed on 15 November. When Spellman renewed
his “wonderfully generous” offer soon after that, Sullivan responded jubilantly
that that “the spirit of aggiornamento” made it possible for her to accept it, making the upcoming Thanksgiving holiday “one of the happiest of my whole life.”55 Sullivan went to the Holy Land and would return often as she became an even more renowned scholar and experienced congregational leader.56

If the “spirit of aggiornamento” had led to an abrupt pivot in Kathryn Sullivan’s life, it precipitated an equally sudden reversal in the afterlife of the woman she and other RSCJs regarded as their spiritual mother. For the RSCJs, the mandates of Vatican II diminished, rather than magnified, their enthusiasm for their founder’s cause. They were no less confident in Philippine’s holiness; they were simply less inclined to expend the resources required to prove it. In November 1967, the Duchesne Guild Bulletin, launched in the heady early days of Vatican II, when Duchesne’s canonization had seemed imminent, announced that it would cease publication. Although it had become apparent by 1967 that the event was “not in the foreseeable future,” the RSCJs did not explicitly abandon Duchesne’s cause, and there is no evidence that they ever formally renounced their position as petitioners. They did judge, however, that devoting the necessary time, personnel, and money toward canonizing Duchesne was no longer justifiable in light of the congregation’s renewed commitment to the poor. Such an endeavor, according to one member of the congregation, did not seem “in keeping with the spirit of Philippine herself.”57

Members of the Society of the Sacred Heart were not the only Americans to express concerns about the expense and labor involved in pursuing canonization. In 1975, the Wall Street Journal published an article about Elizabeth Ann Seton’s cause that alleged that the Sisters of Charity had spent “millions” of dollars in its pursuit. According to “Rev. Francis X. Murphy, an authority on sainthood,” the article reported, finding out exact costs or anything about the selection of new saints was as impossible as discovering the details of Cold War diplomacy: “It’s like trying to find out how a missile is put together and fired off.” The article also quoted Joel Wells, editor of the Chicago-based liberal Catholic magazine The Critic, who consigned canonization’s significance “to the past” and argued that “there is a lot more the church could do with the money spent on it.”58

In a response later published in the Wall Street Journal, the archivist of the Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill rebutted the article’s claim that pursuing the cause had incurred “crippling deficits” for the congregation. After a brief sketch of the six communities that traced their ancestry to Seton, she
explained that, in response to a request from the vice-postulator in 1939, each community had contributed a hundred dollars per month to Seton’s cause. These funds had placed the cause on such a sound financial footing that the present vice-postulator, Sylvester Taggart, had removed the assessment in 1971. Anyone familiar with the background of the relationship between the sisters and the original vice-postulator, who had raised such an enormous furor in imposing his “tax,” would have savored the delicious irony: a Sister of Charity was actually awarding Salvator Burgio public credit for financial solvency! Nevertheless, the letter set the record straight: promoting Seton as a saint had not bankrupted her spiritual daughters. Privately, Sisters of Charity embraced the advertising adage that there was no such thing as bad publicity. The article had garnered more attention for Seton’s cause than her promoters could have generated through their own efforts, even, as one observed pragmatically, “if we had gone into the multimillion dollar PR campaign implied in the story.”

The Wall Street Journal article also elicited other spirited defenses of canonization-related expenditures. Writing in Columbia magazine, Jesuit Robert Graham argued that to faithful Catholics—unlike denizens of “the world of finance . . . who, when seeing a masterwork of art, immediately ask how much it cost”—the prospect of raising one of their own to the honors of the altar was priceless. Long and precise processes always required money, Graham pointed out, and canonizations resembled “extended litigation in secular courts,” in that they went all the way “up to the ‘Supreme Court,’ the pope.” Francis Litz also went on the record defending the material resources required to honor a saint, estimating that the Redemptorists had spent approximately $35,000 to stage Neumann’s beatification ceremony. In comparison, he pointed out, “it cost $6 million to inaugurate Richard Nixon, and who’s more important?”

Litz was especially cognizant of the time, expense, and labor a cause for canonization entailed: by that point, he was overseeing not only John Neumann’s cause but also that of a second prospective saint from Philadelphia: Katharine Drexel. The most revelatory causes are not necessarily those that move forward—or as Duchesne’s did during Vatican II, backward—during a particular era but those that originate during it. In many ways, the most illustrative cause of the council era belonged to a woman who, coincidentally and posthumously, cemented John Neumann’s connection to a third local congregation of Catholic sisters.
An “Unmistakably American” Saint

Almost a quarter century after Frances Cabrini’s canonization, poet Phyllis McGinley was one of the midcentury Americans who resented Rome’s petulant refusal to canonize a “truly native candidate.” McGinley also complained about the outsize attention paid to Cabrini’s external accomplishments; one would think, McGinley wrote in 1969, that Cabrini had been “canonized as much for her business acumen as for her holiness.” McGinley was even more dismissive of those who would claim the Italian-born woman as a U.S. saint. McGinley pinned her hopes for an American patron not on the recently beatified Seton or Neumann but on a newly minted U.S. Servant of God: Katharine Drexel, the Philadelphia heiress and founder of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament. In McGinley’s view, Drexel had combined “holiness with indigenous Yankee know-how” in a manner that made her “as unmistakably American as Catherine of Siena, say, was Italian.” While that Catherine had been “the most powerful woman in Europe,” Drexel had been similarly influential in the United States. McGinley mainly admired Drexel for her generosity, but she also included a tongue-in-cheek homage to her stamina. She playfully suggested that Drexel had lived almost ninety-seven years solely because, knowing that the income from her family’s fortune would revert to other beneficiaries after her death, she wanted to prolong the period in which her wealth would flow to Native Americans and African Americans. “Never underestimate,” McGinley warned, “the stubbornness of a woman or a saint.”

McGinley was neither the first nor the last Drexel supporter to compare her hero to St. Catherine of Siena. Writing to Drexel before she entered her novitiate, James O’Connor, formerly of Philadelphia and then bishop of Omaha, Nebraska, sent her feast day greetings: “May your patroness obtain for you the grace to be a peacemaker among the races, as she was among the nationalities.” Drexel’s spiritual daughters evoked O’Connor’s salute in the first issue of The Peacemaker, the quarterly bulletin used to promote Drexel as a saint that appeared for the first time in 1964. The official launch of Drexel’s cause followed a five-year effort undertaken by Mother Mary Anselm, the superior general of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, who with other members of the community had begun to contemplate nominating Drexel for canonization soon after the founder’s death. A flurry of new biographical information convinced them there was support beyond Drexel’s immediate circle. In 1957, Katherine Burton,
who had also produced biographies of both Elizabeth Ann Seton and Mother Théodore Guérin, published an account of Drexel’s life that portrayed her as a patriotic as well as a pious hero—“an American in the real and abundant sense of the word.”65

In 1959 Mother Anselm approached Cardinal John Francis O’Hara to ask for his help in initiating a cause for Drexel. The cardinal had already proven to be a valuable ally to the sisters in the wake of Katharine’s death four years before. Recognizing their precarious financial position without income from Drexel’s inheritance, O’Hara had directed a number of the Philadelphia entities on Francis Drexel’s original list of beneficiaries—Redemptorists among them—to donate a portion of their windfall to the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament.66 O’Hara had also been amenable to helping the congregation promote Drexel as a saint, but he had died soon after his conversation with Mother Anselm. But Krol, O’Hara’s ambitious successor, embraced the prospect of a second Philadelphia saint and by 1964 had authorized the opening of Drexel’s process. Whereas Krol hoped local Jesuits would act as the necessary proxies for Drexel’s congregation, the sisters preferred to work with the Redemptorists. They may well have been encouraged by Litz and Ferrante’s triumph in securing Neumann’s beatification the previous year, but they also cited historical precedent as a rationale for this collaboration: when Drexel had gone to Rome to secure pontifical approval for her congregation, a Redemptorist canon lawyer had helped her navigate the Roman bureaucracy. Notwithstanding Krol’s tempestuous relationship with Ferrante, the archbishop eventually agreed to the arrangement, and Ferrante became Drexel’s postulator and Litz her vice-postulator.67

Drexel’s family fortune had allowed the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament to sidestep the question of whether pursuing a cause for canonization represented the best use of congregational resources. In 1927, Drexel’s sister Louise Morrell had established a special fund for the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament from which the superior could draw at her discretion to support any “extraordinary work.” After Mother Anselm decided that Drexel’s canonization fit these criteria, the income from that original fund covered all expenses related to Drexel’s cause.68 The sisters paid Litz a nominal fee and worked with him to develop promotional material explaining Drexel’s relevance in a post–Vatican II church. “The present stress of ecumenism,” Litz argued, had been evident in Drexel’s openness to Protestants in all schools run by her congregation. In naming her
congregation after the Blessed Sacrament, and in recognizing the Eucharist as
“the source and summit” of her life, Drexel had “lived and believed in a Eucha-
ristic orientation not verbalized by the Church until Vatican II.”69

In seeking to connect Drexel to prominent issues of the day, Litz and the
Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament were doing nothing other than what U.S.-

base

petitioners had been doing since they nominated their first candidates
for canonization in the 1880s: projecting what they saw as the best and bright-
est part of their American stories onto their prospective saints. Yet Drexel’s
case brought with it a new challenge. During the council era, the darkest and
most divisive aspects of American culture would increasingly encroach on U.S.
Catholics’ efforts to present candidates for the church’s highest honor. In retro-
spect, Drexel’s real claim to being “unmistakably American” may lie not in the
innovation or stamina she had displayed during her lifetime but in the degree
to which the fractures of the 1960s and 1970s intruded upon her afterlife.

As the founder of a congregation dedicated to ministering to African Ameri-
cans, the most glaring such issue in Drexel’s case involved race. After presiding
at Drexel’s reception into the Sisters of Mercy (the congregation with whom she
had prepared for religious life) in 1889, Archbishop Patrick Ryan of Philadel-
phia had proclaimed her a “prophetess of reparation and conciliation between
the races.” Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Drexel’s promotional material
frequently referred to her as a prophet, arguing that in founding a congrega-
tion “devoted completely to the welfare of the Indians and Blacks” Drexel had
“provided a viable means for carrying on a continual battle against racial in-
justice.”70 On the face of it, the 1960s and 1970s appeared to be an auspicious
time to present Drexel as a crusader for racial justice. But however prophetic
Drexel’s approach to race relations may have appeared in the 1890s, aspects of
it appeared decidedly paternalistic in the context of the civil rights movement.
Drexel’s supporters would have to contend with accusations that Drexel, far
from having been a visionary, had been rooted all too firmly in her time and
subject to all of its biases. Sister Mary Elise, a Sister of the Blessed Sacrament
who had worked with Drexel, “took [the backlash against the congregation]
in stride.” It was understandable, she maintained, that learning about the “the
suffering, the unfairness,” in their past made African Americans angry. “And
in their anger they lashed out at the most accessible target—us.”71

But while coming to terms with the present-day consequences of Drexel’s
choices was one thing, preventing them from interfering with the case for her
sanctity was another, and that task fell to Litz and other promoters. The most
seemingly damning evidence against Drexel centered on her refusal to accept African American women into the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament. Those close to Drexel insisted that her refusal to accept black aspirants had stemmed not from her racial prejudices but instead from a desire to support all-black congregations such as the Baltimore-based Oblate Sisters of Providence and the Sisters of the Holy Family in New Orleans. Accepting African American women into the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament would have siphoned candidates away from them. According to Sister Juliana Haynes, “Mother Katharine did not want to hurt the all-black orders by drawing vocations away from them.”

Members of those “all-black” congregations corroborated such claims. Testifying on behalf of Drexel’s cause, Sister Marie Enfanta Gonzales, superior general of the Oblate Sisters of Providence, offered her own life story as a defense of Drexel’s decision. Educated by the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament in grade school, Gonzales had become aware of her vocation and contemplated entering the congregation. Drexel directed her instead to the Oblate Sisters of Providence, as she had done in many other cases. Gonzales contended that the rationale was not racism: Mother Katharine’s “real and only reason was that we had our two Black communities [the Oblate Sisters of Providence and the Sisters of the Holy Family]. Mother Katharine really felt that it would have taken away from our Black Community.”

Drexel’s supporters, aware of the potential for controversy, sought to avert it by crafting a narrative that focused on what she had done rather than on what she had failed to do for African Americans. The bedrock of their argument rested on Drexel’s “Eucharistic-centered” spirituality, which led her to recognize racial equality in the eyes of God. Whereas belief in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist had been the deciding factor in Seton’s conversion to Catholicism, for Katharine Drexel, belief in the Eucharist as a source of unity for all Catholics had inspired her to devote her family’s fortune to ensure that underserved populations within the church could receive the sacrament. To that end, Drexel subsidized the establishment of black churches, supported religious congregations engaged in missionary activity, and nurtured black vocations. In this last respect, Drexel had been ahead of her time in recognizing that people of color could have a vocation to religious life—a principle that had been far from universally accepted when she had founded the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament. In 1898, Drexel had explained why she believed African American girls should be permitted to take religious vows. “Why should they not be religious?” Drexel asked Rev. J. R. Slattery, a member of an order of priests.
who ministered to African Americans. “As I understand they are sent to do the work of religious without the graces or the protection of religious. . . . If it be possible—as seems to be the case—that the Colored girl may live in religion, why should she not do so, and enjoy its advantages?”

Testimony from prominent African American Catholics buttressed the case that Drexel was ahead of her time on race relations. Litz’s file of promotional material on Drexel included quotes from Rev. Augustine Tolton, the first black priest ordained in America, who had drawn parallels between himself and Drexel: “As I stand alone as the first Negro priest of America,” he told her, “so you stand alone as the first one to give your whole treasury for the sole benefit of the Colored and Indians.” Drexel’s ovations also came from more contemporary sources. In 1966, Judge Raymond Pace Alexander, the first black graduate of Wharton, went so far as to claim that “it does not require the profound imagination of the prophet to believe firmly that had the conscience of the great Protestant establishment of wealth and church been as shaken about the condition of African-Americans after the Civil War” as had Mother Drexel’s, “the bitter conflicts of the last century between the races, more particularly the explosive events during the last decade, would never have taken place.”

The majority of acclamations on Drexel’s behalf came from African American leaders who had been educated in institutions established by her congregation. Among the most effusive was Ellen Tarry, an African American children’s author and figure in the Harlem Renaissance who had been personally handed her diploma by Drexel when she graduated from the Sisters’ St. Francis de Sales School in Rock Castle, Virginia. According to Tarry, though, the founder had given her something more meaningful: the gift of faith.

Another vocal Drexel supporter was Norman Francis, the president of Xavier University in New Orleans, the nation’s first college for black Catholics and the institution understood to be the “crowning point” of Drexel’s educational mission. Echoing Tarry and others, Francis characterized Drexel as a “heroine” who had “national influence” among black Catholics. In an age when most church leaders had ignored them, he argued, Drexel had devoted her life to alleviating their suffering and in so doing was singlehandedly responsible for ensuring that African American Catholics did not leave the church. Drexel had been an exception among Catholic leaders, Francis allowed, but she had been “enough of an exception for us to keep the faith.” Francis expressed what many of Drexel’s devotees identified as her most significant spiritual legacy:
through her spiritual and material support, Drexel had given black Catholics a reason to stay in the church.

Sister Marie Gonzales, the superior of the Oblate Sisters of Providence who defended Drexel’s decision not to accept black women into her congregation, was an alumna of Xavier who also believed that Drexel’s ministry had made a lasting difference in race relations. At Xavier, Gonzales claimed, she and other future African American leaders learned that they “did not have to be afraid of White people.” The presence of Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament had made a lasting difference throughout the South. “Every place where Mother Katharine and her sisters have not been in the church,” Gonzales testified, “the people are different. I noticed that.” Asked whether pursuing Drexel’s canonization was “worthwhile,” Gonzales quoted Sargent Shriver at a meeting of Head Start, the early intervention program for young children. According to Gonzales, Shriver had called Drexel “the first Head Start director of the United States, because she was the first one to go help the children of the poor and go do something about it.”

Other admirers of Drexel also praised her in the parlance of the day, characterizing her as a woman who moved easily between the “affluent society” and “other Americans” or as a person who “had plunged into the black liberation movement decades before it was a hip thing.” A bishop from Louisiana who had worked with the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament supported the founder’s canonization because her love for “the most neglected of God’s people” bore witness to the Catholic Church’s commitment to civil rights for African Americans. “The Protestants had their Martin Luther King,” he said, but Catholics had Katharine Drexel—a woman who had a reputation “of goodness, of service, of generosity” that surpassed, he claimed, even that of Mother Seton.

Litz and other Drexel promoters had apparently been less concerned about the possibility that indigenous people might object to Drexel’s canonization, despite the fact that Drexel’s practices and attitudes toward them had also been consistent with those of most Americans of her time. Perhaps they did not anticipate backlash from Native Americans because Drexel had admitted a few native women into the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament. They may have also realized that, whatever Drexel’s limitations had been, her case was unlikely to inspire indigenous protests to the same degree European missionaries to the colonial United States had begun to do. In the 1960s, Junípero Serra, the Spanish-born Franciscan whose cause formally opened after the North
American Jesuits’ canonization, emerged as a particular flash point for native protests. Serra’s supporters insisted it was misguided to make Serra a scapegoat for the misdeeds of European colonizers and sought to counter negative publicity by framing him as a perfect saint for the modern age. The bishop of San Diego, for instance, suggested that Serra had a future as the “patron saint of ecologists,” given his work in “the development and preservation of natural beauty in California.” In 1969, Rev. Neil Moholy, Serra’s vice-postulator, looked beyond earthly boundaries to emphasize his timeliness, drawing “a tremendous parallel between Serra’s time and ours. He closed the era of (Spanish) exploration and we have crossed the threshold of the space age.” Serra’s promoters also had their eyes on the looming U.S. bicentennial. Moholy, recognizing that Pope Paul VI wanted to “promote national heroes” in conjunction with the celebration, argued that Serra, unlike John Neumann and other saints from the Eastern Seaboard, would call attention to Catholicism’s long presence in the American West. “As people are more familiar with the 13 colonies,” the Franciscan observed, “many don’t realize that a culture possessing similar values was flourishing, thanks largely to Serra, at the time of the Revolutionary War.” Yet Serra’s legacy would elicit more heated protests as his cause for canonization progressed.

As for Drexel, the question of whether her practices and attitudes regarding African Americans complicate her sanctity remains an open one that has begun to capture the interest of scholars. Far less attention has been paid to the intersection between Drexel’s cause and a second social movement that converged with the mandates of Vatican II to reshape U.S. Catholicism and American life: feminism. As noted by Mary Luke Tobin, the U.S. sister who was one of fifteen women at the council’s third and fourth sessions, Vatican II offered “an opening, although just a tiny crack in the door, to a recognition of the vast indifference toward women and the ignoring of their potential within the whole body of the Church.” Carol Coston, a Dominican sister from Adrian, Michigan, who was one of many U.S. sisters sent to serve the developing world in the 1960s, observed that while Vatican II had opened “windows” into the renewal of religious life, the women’s movement had opened doors, leading Catholic sisters to cultivate “a feminist perspective that recognized and critiqued domination wherever it operated—men over women, whites over blacks, U.S. over Third World countries, military over civilians, [and] hierarchy over religious.”

The growing feminist awareness among Catholic sisters led to highly publicized clashes between specific congregations and their clerical superiors in
dioceses throughout the United States. It also generated conflict at the national level. By 1970, the term “women’s liberation” appeared regularly in memos, correspondence, and published documents of the Conference of Major Superiors of Women. Feminist concerns inspired the organization to change its name to the Leadership Conference of Women Religious in 1972, arguing that the word “superior” in the former title had emphasized hierarchy and unilateralism rather than inclusion and collaboration and that the incorporation of “women religious” emphasized their identity as women. From the perspective of the Vatican’s Congregation for Religious and for Secular Institutes, which had to approve the change, however, the word “leadership” became the primary sticking point. After three years of debate, the congregation eventually approved the new name on the condition the title be followed by a clarifying sentence: “This title is to be interpreted as: The Conference of Leaders of Congregations of Women Religious of the United States of America” and not, in other words, leaders in any other realm.

The most pressing question of Catholic women’s leadership within the church involved their admission to the ordained ministry. In 1963, St. Joan’s International Alliance, an organization of Catholic women named in honor of the French saint, began to submit an annual petition to the Vatican in support of women’s ordination. They initially cloaked this radical request in deferential language: “St. Joan’s international alliance reaffirms its loyalty and filial devotion and asks that should the Church in her own wisdom and in her good time decide to extend to women the dignity of the priesthood, women would be willing and eager to respond.” Such submissiveness would not survive the resurgence of feminism. In 1974, the Leadership Conference of Women Religious passed a resolution to support women’s ordination; the next year, twelve hundred Catholics gathered in Detroit for the Women’s Ordination Conference.

Canonization represented another arena in which a blossoming identity as feminists among Catholic women—and in particular, among Catholic sisters—affect their relationships with local clerics and Vatican officials. The alliance between Redemptorists and the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament on Drexel’s behalf, for example, looked much more like a partnership than many previous relationships established between female saint-seekers and their male proxies. Francis Litz oversaw the components that entailed direct interaction with the Holy See, while the sisters published *The Peacemaker*, kept track of potential miracles, and solicited monetary contributions to support the cause. Practical considerations may well have prompted this division of labor;
advancing Neumann’s cause, with its idiosyncratic complications, certainly kept Litz busy enough. Litz’s personality was also a factor; sensitive and kind, he appears to have deferred to Drexel’s spiritual daughters to the extent canon law permitted. Litz was certainly no Salvator Burgio. Nevertheless, it was also clear that activism on the part of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament fit into a larger pattern. As Sisters Mary Nona McGreal and Josephine Ryan were doing on behalf of Mazzuchelli and Guérin, Mother Anselm and other Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament were taking up Isabel Toohey’s mantle. Toohey’s attempts to wrest control from Burgio had foreshadowed the transformations of the council era. As consecrated Catholic women sought more control over their own lives, they would also claim more authority over the afterlives of their spiritual ancestors.

Not all U.S. Catholic sisters embraced feminism. Notably, Mother Claudia Honsberger, superior of the Philadelphia IHMs, was among those who believed the new direction of U.S. religious life reflected a misinterpretation of the council’s teaching. Honsberger and others formed an organization in 1971, the Consortium Perfectae Caritatis, that would rival the Leadership Conference of Women Religious. As the afterlife of another Philadelphia sister was helping to make clear, cross currents of anti-feminism would also turn canonization into contested terrain. In addition to touting Drexel as a prophet in terms of race relations, her promoters also suggested she had been a visionary in terms of women’s leadership within the church. Litz argued that Drexel had called attention to the role of women “a hundred years before the actualization of those concerns in the Church as we see them emerging today.” In the petition they sent to the Holy Father in 1975, U.S. bishops similarly cited Drexel’s “prophetic interest” in expanding “the role of women in the church one hundred years before these concerns reached the current level of interest.” They added, however, a telling qualification: Drexel had been “an ecclesial woman, always sensitive to the mind of the church and to the authority within the church.” The emphasis underscored the message: just as Drexel had obeyed orders from the pope and her episcopal advisers, so, too, should contemporary Catholic women listen to what Catholic leaders were telling them about their proper roles in the church. One year after the U.S. bishops submitted Drexel’s petition, the Vatican definitively declared that women could not be ordained in the Catholic Church. Drexel’s obedience to church authorities would subsequently become a theme of the testimony gathered in her apostolic process. Asked to speak about Drexel’s
relationship with the Catholic hierarchy, the bishop who had delivered the homily at her funeral responded that he had never heard of any “controversy” between Drexel and the bishops. It had been “quite the opposite with Mother Cabrini,” he opined, who had “fought with every bishop along the line.”

The need for women to obey church authorities also surfaced in the causes of other U.S. candidates for canonization. In reference to Neumann, for instance, Kerins’s otherwise optimistic address to Catholic sisters associated with the bishop made clear that the “new freedom in religious life” had definite limits. While vague about what those limits were, Kerins urged Catholic sisters to be “most exact in following the guidance of the Church,” as Neumann always had been. “As religious today,” he told his audience, which included members of Mother Claudia’s IHMs, “we will walk a safe path in transition only under the guidance of the church.”

John Tracy Ellis saw in Seton’s story a similar message for Catholic women of the 1970s. According to the historian, Seton would have eventually overcome her “natural modesty” and been comfortable reading the scriptures at Mass, a liturgical innovation of the council era that Ellis deemed entirely appropriate. He was sure, however, that Seton would have firmly resisted “the insistence of some women on the right to ordination.”

Such cautions were hardly new; church leaders had long marshaled Seton and other saints to support traditional female roles. In the context of the 1970s, however, such efforts would elicit more active resistance from some Catholic women. As they began to chafe under male clerical authority, some sisters shied away from direct engagement with church leaders; as one Sister of Charity put it, “In a post–Vatican II climate, the term ‘hierarchy’ can raise, even in sympathetic circles, controversial hackles.” Such perceptions obviously bled over into canonization processes, which depended on interaction with church authorities first at the diocesan levels and finally at the Vatican. One Sinsinawa Dominican bristled, for example, at a priest’s suggestion that the congregation appoint a “promoter” of Mazzuchelli’s cause within each of its provinces. “The word Cause to many of our Sisters means formal legalistic procedures in Rome,” she explained. Such formal language was “completely disassociated with the man, Father Samuel.” It would be better, she advised, for Mazzuchelli’s champions to emerge at “the grass roots level” rather than be imposed from the top down.

For many Catholics sisters in the years to come, emerging feminist sensibilities would also magnify their financial-based reservations about pursuing causes for canonization. Though the Sisters of Charity had traveled too far with Seton’s cause to develop any such misgivings, they nonetheless allowed
that feminism complicated Seton’s story. Sister Patricia Noone, a member of the Sisters of Charity of New York, explained that it would be inaccurate to label Seton a feminist, because “she had largely responded to the direction of men.” Still, Noone—a feminist herself—suggested that Seton had prefigured the movement by having “stood up to [men] when she had to” and having been “a woman in touch with herself.” In identifying the sources of Seton’s strength, Noone continued, contemporary feminists might find their own.⁹⁹ Noone and other Catholic feminists became even more hopeful about Seton’s ability to reflect a new moment in American womanhood as she stood on the verge of what some understood—a bit too optimistically—as a feminist victory.

The Lady Won?

Seton’s advocates continued to maneuver behind the scenes, with concrete results. Spellman and Cicognani, two of her staunchest advocates, had been powerful actors at the Second Vatican Council, and in its wake they continued to leverage their influence to move her cause forward. In 1973, the Congregation for the Causes of Saints certified that another cure—the one that had occurred at the Yonkers hospital in 1963—qualified as a miracle and could be credited to Seton’s intercession. Although Spellman had died in 1967, Cicognani, in one of his last acts before his death in December 1973, appealed to the Holy See to exempt Seton from the second required canonization miracle. The request was granted.¹⁰⁰ Meanwhile, the final stage of John Neumann’s canonization process was doing nothing to counter his postulator Ferrante’s claim that it was the most difficult in Redemptorist history. The authenticated miracles that had been so difficult to secure during the beatification phase once again proved elusive. Litz continued to keep track of reported cures, but Ferrante deemed few of them likely to withstand scrutiny. Reading between the lines of Ferrante’s correspondence with Krol, who was named a cardinal in 1967, it is also evident that the Roman postulator spent a great deal of time struggling, usually in vain, to prevent Krol from engaging in unseemly lobbying on Neumann’s behalf. When Seton’s exemption was granted, it ensured that her “partisans” would defeat Neumann’s champions in the race for canonization as they had in beatification. As Neumann’s advocates continued to wrestle with frustrating medical cases, Seton’s canonization was scheduled for September 1975. “The lady won,” Francis Murphy grudgingly conceded.¹⁰¹
An array of signs and symbols displayed during Seton’s canonization painted her elevation as an all-American triumph. Thousands of pilgrims “flocked” to Rome for a celebration that was “a thoroughly American affair,” complete with U.S. flags and strains of “The Star-Spangled Banner.” Pope Paul VI, quoting Spellman in his homily at the canonization Mass, characterized Seton as a “wholly American” woman. He exhorted U.S. citizens to “Rejoice!” The inclusion of the nation’s “first flower” in the calendar of the saints, he told them, proved that “your land too, America, is indeed worthy of receiving into its fertile ground the seed of evangelical holiness.” An image on a giant tapestry hanging behind the specially constructed outdoor altar in St. Peter’s Square reinforced the pope’s message: it depicted Seton hovering above a globe with the United States in its foreground.

Pope Paul VI’s homily also alluded to the significance of Seton’s canonization occurring during the United Nations–sponsored International Women’s Year. Like the UN initiative, the pontiff suggested, Seton’s elevation both called attention to the role of women in the world and sought to further “their authentic advancement in society.” Going even further, Time magazine dubbed Seton’s canonization “a nod to women’s lib, for Mother Seton was a spirited and independent woman.” Though the Vatican had most assuredly not envisioned Seton’s canonization in such a manner, the liturgy did incorporate a modest gender innovation: for the first time, a woman read from scripture at a papal Mass. Chosen for this honor was Sister Hildegarde Mahoney, a Sister of Charity from the New Jersey branch of Seton’s religious family who was then serving as the leader of the Federation of Mother Seton’s Daughters, as the former conference established in 1947 had been renamed. The once-distant siblings had continued to grow closer through their annual meetings and other collaborative ventures.

In later years, when Sister Hildegarde contemplated writing a history of the federation, her review of historical documents convinced her that Spellman had rendered Seton’s cause “a great service” by facing the problems caused by Burgio “head-on” and convening the emergency meeting with Seton’s spiritual daughters and representatives of the Sacred Congregation at Mount St. Vincent in 1948. Mahoney awarded most of the credit for Seton’s canonization and the federation’s success, however, to Sister Isabel Toohey. Had Toohey not already convened the Conference of Mother Seton’s Daughters on two previous occasions, thereby laying the foundation for collaboration, Spellman’s intervention might have been “injurious rather than helpful” to Seton’s cause.
perspective of hindsight, Mahoney could rejoice in the fruit of Toohey’s efforts and marvel at her courage in uniting the Seton communities under the auspices of the conference, an alliance that has since become ever more critical to the ministries and mission of Seton’s spiritual daughters. As membership declined within the Seton communities, as it did in most U.S. congregations of women, there was a strength in union impossible for individual communities alone.

Mahoney’s perspective is interesting. It had taken far longer for Seton to become a canonized saint than Archbishop James Gibbons would have supposed back in 1882, or even than Spellman would have guessed when he became head of the Archdiocese of New York in 1939. With what Mahoney called “the benefit of hindsight,” however, the Sisters of Charity could see the hand of God at work in Seton’s slow journey. Had Seton been canonized more speedily, or had Salvator Burgio’s machinations not forced Sister Toohey’s hand, the branches of Seton’s spiritual family might never have been reunited. Mahoney’s reflections suggest that, however complicated by imperfect human actors, a canonization process always unfolds in God’s time. From the perspective of her spiritual daughters, at least, Seton had been canonized at exactly the right moment.

Viewed from other angles, however, the timing of Seton’s canonization was less optimal—or at least more ironic. As Jesuit Robert Graham observed, Seton’s canonization had occurred in the midst of a de-emphasis on saints in post–Vatican II worship, making it “rather paradoxical to speak of the ‘honors of the altar’ at a time when statues of saints long canonized are being removed from the proximity of the Eucharistic table.” Although some commentators have referred to this element of liturgical reform that had swept through American Catholicism after Vatican II as a fresh “stripping of the altars”—Eamon Duffy’s characterization of the cataclysmic changes in English religious life during the Reformation under Henry VIII and Edward VI—the comparison is extreme. It was true, however, that the council’s emphasis on the importance of the Mass (especially in Sacrosanctum Concilium, the council’s “Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy”) affected devotions like the rosary, novenas in honor of the saints, the benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, Forty Hours, and stations of the cross. Though never prohibited in the post–Vatican II era, they were not strongly promoted and “pushed to the margins of Catholic life.”

More important to our story was a second irony in the timing of Seton’s triumph. By 1975, U.S. saint-seekers’ original objectives—cementing a connection to the Holy See and affirming Catholics’ place in the nation—had already been secured, without the help of a native patron. U.S. Catholic leaders’ prominence
at the Vatican, beginning with Spellman’s episcopal appointment and consolidated in the later stages and in the wake of the Second Vatican Council, had testified to American influence in Rome. The GI Bill, the onset of the Cold War, and demographic change had steadily erased differences between U.S. Catholics and their fellow citizens, and the 1960 election of John F. Kennedy to the U.S. presidency had symbolically affirmed Catholics’ ability to be loyal American citizens fifteen years before the church added Seton’s name to the roster of canonized saints. In light of these developments, the arrival of the first “wholly American” saint seemed somewhat anticlimactic. Seton’s supporters, of course, insisted that U.S. Catholics should not view it that way. U.S. Catholics’ joy in Seton’s elevation, according to one U.S. priest, should be absolute, rather than “mechanical or polite . . . or quickly fleeting.” Through her, God had touched the United States in a special way. The nation’s Catholics should, therefore, “hitch their wagon to Mother Seton’s star” and realize that under her patronage “a new, endless day has dawned for the American Church.”

Whether or not U.S. Catholics would revel in Seton’s patronage, it soon became clear that American saints would no longer be the “rare birds” they had once been. Seton’s canonization had been only the third in nearly a century of U.S. saint-seeking. The pace would soon pick up dramatically, and by 2015, the church would have raised another eight Americans to the honors of the altar. This rapid acceleration at the center was partly explained by changes on the periphery. The U.S. church, no longer disorganized at home and without influence in Rome, was far better positioned to support saints’ causes throughout this period than it had been when U.S. bishops had proposed Tekakwitha and the martyrs in 1884, or even when petitioners had muddled their way through the process in the mid-twentieth century. Even so, the rising numbers of new saints was a universal phenomenon in the church, driven primarily by the man who led it between 1978 and 2005. More than Seton’s canonization, it was John Paul II’s elevation to the papacy that, combined with cultural change, signaled a new day in the story of sanctity in America.
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